

VZCZCXRO9532
RR RUEHBZ RUEH DU RUEHJO RUEHRN
DE RUEHMR #0060/01 0371534
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 061534Z FEB 07
FM AMEMBASSY MASERU
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 2600
INFO RUCNSAD/SADC COLLECTIVE
RUEHMR/AMEMBASSY MASERU 2947

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MASERU 000060

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DEPT ALSO FOR AF/S

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [LT](#)

SUBJECT: TEMPERATURE RISING IN LESOTHO'S POLITICAL SEASON

REF: A) MASERU 0037, B) MASERU 0024, C) MASERU 0020, and previous

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¶1. SUMMARY: Lesotho's upcoming national election, scheduled for February 17, has raised the tenor and velocity of political discourse in the Mountain Kingdom. While a recent emergency meeting of the Independent Election Commission (IEC) focused on technical election problems, the candidate nomination process proceeded calmly. A USAID-funded NDI pre-election assessment team concluded that while election organization could be better, conditions do exist for free and fair elections in Lesotho. Heated UN forums have allowed the diplomatic community to engage with the IEC and Lesotho's political parties, and SADC's Election Observation Mission officially announced its presence. It is clear to observers over the last few weeks that the temperature is rising here in Lesotho. END SUMMARY.

Emergency Meeting on Lost Voter Rolls

¶2. On January 15, Lesotho's Independent Election Commission (IEC) called together the heads of Lesotho's political parties and the diplomatic corps to discuss its state of readiness for the upcoming elections. The most startling revelation was that a computer glitch had caused the IEC to temporarily lose more than 10% of the voter rolls (approximately 120,700 individuals), but that consultants had now recovered most of this data. The IEC Chairman also announced that funds had been allocated to pay party agents for their observer and oversight roles at polling stations, as well as a very limited sum for campaign financing.

Calm Candidate Nominations

¶3. On January 19, the nomination of candidates for the National Assembly elections proceeded smoothly throughout Lesotho and without any reported incidents of violence or intimidation. Supporters of different political parties, clad in their party colors, sang and chanted party slogans as they accompanied their candidates for registration. As expected, the parties with the most supporters were the governing Lesotho Congress for Democracy (LCD), and the opposition All Basotho Convention (ABC) and Basotho National Party (BNP). The LCD and the ABC are the only parties that have fielded candidates in all 80 of Lesotho's parliamentary constituencies (the BCP has fielded 76). Smaller parties and independent candidates attended registration events as well.

NDI Pre-Election Assessment Team

14. On January 25, the National Democratic Institute (NDI)'s pre-election assessment team released its findings to a standing room only press conference in Maseru. The mission--comprised of senior officials from Canada, Germany, Kenya, and NDI and supported by USAID funding--stated emphatically that in light of the historically new snap elections in Lesotho, "extraordinary times call for extraordinary measures." The NDI team encouraged the IEC and the GOL to exceed the minimum legal requirements regarding trust building measures and to reach out to Basotho citizens to explain their efforts to ensure free and fair elections. While announcing that conditions do exist in Lesotho for free and fair elections, the team offered several specific recommendations, including allowing parties to break up their allotted broadcast time on state radio and television channels into smaller segments and for the IEC to create an effective communications outreach strategy.

Heated Political Discussions

15. On January 29 and 31, the UN resident coordinator, in collaboration with the U.S. Embassy and other donor missions, hosted important pre-elections meetings. The first meeting brought together the diplomatic community and the Independent Election Commission (IEC), while the second was between the diplomatic community and Lesotho's political parties. In the first meeting, the diplomatic community, including Ambassador June Carter Perry, raised several concerns: 1) the continued employment at the IEC of an individual in a prominent position who remains under a cloud of suspicion due to an ongoing fraud case; 2) the IEC's lack of an effective communications strategy on its actions and issues; and 3) the IEC's non-interference in the inequitable distribution of airtime on state television and radio. The IEC responded, respectively, that: 1) all accused are innocent until proven guilty; 2) the IEC is improving its communications ability; and 3) while the IEC has responsibility to ensure equal coverage of parties in the state media, it has no actual power.

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16. The second forum became a heated platform for political parties to raise grievances about perceived flaws in Lesotho's electoral system. While raising many of the same issues as in the first meeting, opposition parties also raised a number of concerns relating to the potential for fraud in the February polling. One party leader, retired General Lekhanya of the Basotho National Party, stated his belief that Prime Minister Mosisili had approached outside nations for "military help" in case events turned sour following Lesotho's elections. This lively forum highlighted the rumors, complaints, and mistrust circulating in Lesotho prior to the national election.

Launch of SADC Observation Mission

17. On February 5, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Parliamentary Forum's Electoral Observer Mission convened a public event to announce its official launch. The delegation included SADC Secretariat Political Director Lt. Col. Tanki Mothae, SADC Executive Secretary Dr. Tomaz Salomao, and Head of the SADC Observer Mission Capt. John Chiligati. The delegation announced that SADC would attempt to have observers in all of Lesotho's ten districts, and that they would cross-check and compare notes with other observation missions. They stressed that their approach would be "eyes on, hands off," and they appealed for maximum cooperation from the IEC and the Basotho people. High-ranking members of the delegation expressed their thanks to Ambassador Perry for the USG's financial support of their mission.

Temperature Rising

18. COMMENT: As the February 17th election edges closer, the pitch of political debate and complaint in Maseru is rising. Opposition parties do have room to rail against certain aspects of Lesotho's democratic process -- for example, one Embassy officer was recent told by two separate senior reporters for the government wire service that they have been secretly banned from writing news about opposition parties. At the same time, the systems put in place by the IEC to resist fraud in voting and vote tallying are formidable and compare well to many Western nations. Embassy Maseru and the rest of the diplomatic community have expressed clearly to the IEC that additional efforts (e.g. radio communications) are needed to let the general public know about its efforts to avoid fraud in the upcoming polls, and that the IEC must continue to fight for equal treatment of political parties in the state media. We note that the IEC did respond, taking their message to rural areas last week through a series of public meetings. END COMMENT.
PERRY